

AMHERST CONSERVATION COMMISSION

Fiscal Year 2007

The Amherst Conservation Commission was formed by a special act of the legislature and a vote of the Amherst Town Meeting and “.... *is the official agency specifically charged with the protection of a community’s natural resources.*” Our purpose is the “*promotion and development of natural resources...and protection of watershed resources.*” In this capacity, the Conservation Commission advises other municipal officials and boards on conservation issues, manages Town-owned land dedicated to conservation purposes, and has responsibility for administering the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act and the Town’s Wetlands Protection Bylaw. Thus the Commission has management, education, and regulatory responsibilities in the Town of Amherst.

The current Commission members are: Nicki Robb (chair), Liv Baker (vice-chair), John Gerber, Eleanor Manire-Gatti, Harvey Allen, and Otto Stein. We work in partnership with Conservation Department staff: Conservation Director David Ziomek, Wetlands Administrator Stephanie Ciccarello, Land Manager Douglas Hutcheson, and Assistant Land Manager David McKinnon. This year proved particularly challenging, with Ms. Ciccarello on maternity leave. Although intern Sarah Minick kept the paperwork moving, professional activities had to be conducted by Commission members, and Conservation and Planning Director Ziomek. While we survived, it was a less than ideal situation. On a positive note, the addition of Ms. Libby Lass to the office has greatly improved the efficiency of the Conservation Department and allowed professional staff to focus on more appropriate activities.

The Conservation Department oversees the management of over 2,000 acres of public conservation land and 80+ miles of public trails. In addition, the Department has assisted the Town in preserving close to 2,000 additional acres of prime farmland through the Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program. Other activities of the Department include: 1) trail maintenance, 2) invasive species awareness and control, 3) beaver habitat management on Town lands, 4) supervision of activities at Puffer’s Pond, 5) maintenance of natural resource signage, 6) encouragement of farming, 7) awareness and protection of endangered species, 8) encouragement of nature and outdoor education, 9) environmental protection, 10) coordination of conservation efforts with other departments and committees, and 11) coordination of conservation efforts with neighboring towns.

The Conservation Commission meets on the second and fourth Wednesday of each month to discuss conservation issues and hold public hearings on issues related to the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act and the Town of Amherst Wetlands Protection Bylaw. In this capacity, we reviewed dozens of plans last year from developers, individual homeowners, businesses, and public bodies for construction or other activities in the immediate vicinity of protected resource areas. Each new project of this sort requires a site visit and follow-up monitoring by either staff and/or Commission members. These public hearings allow continued development of Amherst’s homes and businesses while protecting critical natural resources such as wetlands, ponds, and waterways. There has been a steady increase in the complexity and contentious nature of these hearings as Amherst becomes denser and building is proposed closer to vulnerable resource areas. Some activities in the proximity of protected resources result in violations and require immediate investigation, action, and, often, mitigation or restoration.

In addition to the regular business of the Commission, this year we were actively engaged in:

- revision of the Town of Amherst Wetlands Regulations
- acquisition of Agricultural Preservation Restriction land
- participation in the Town Comprehensive Planning Process
- consultation with the Amherst Farm Committee
- support for the Hitchcock Center for the Environment
- discussions of Flood Protection Zoning
- Community Preservation Act deliberations
- support of the Amherst Shade Tree Committee
- coordination and support to preserve the historic house and property on North East St.
- beaver management
- development of an Open Space and Recreation Plan.

The Town of Amherst has demonstrated a long-term commitment to conservation issues related to sustaining farming, supporting wildlife habitat, and maintenance of natural areas. Without this support, neither the Conservation Department nor the Commission would be effective in the long run. Of particular concern to the Conservation Commission is the continued financial support authorized by the Town Meeting each year. We believe that the public investment in developing conservation resources over the past 30 years is worthy of continued support as these resources do so much to define the character of our town.